

CIA Aides Accepted Illegal Mail Reading

By Orr Kelly

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Three former officials of the inspector general's office of the Central Intelligence Agency told a Senate committee today that a mail opening project operated by the agency for more than 20 years was clearly illegal.

They also said the mail opening operation produced little intelligence of use to the agency although the FBI, which received the "take" from the operation, found it useful.

Thomas Abernathy, formerly a member of the inspector general's staff, said he reported on the operation in 1961 and found that it had no benefit to the agency's Russian section. He said he recommended that the operation be reviewed and that a cover story be devised in case it should be exposed.

In response to questions, he said it was obvious there was a serious question of the legality of the project.

TWO OTHERS — Gordon Stewart, former inspector general, and John Glennon, who was on Stewart's staff — said they made a similar check in 1969. Glennon said he was "quite surprised" to find such an endeavor going on.

He said he did not even mention the illegality of the operation because he "assumed everyone knew it was illegal."

Stewart, too, said flatly, "Everyone knew it was illegal."

Stewart was asked why he had not taken the question of the legality of the mail opening to Lawrence Houston, then general counsel of the CIA.

"I didn't think it was that tricky," he said.

Despite the negative reports from the inspector general's office, the mail opening continued for several more years.

As early as 1962, officials of the agency were worried

about what might happen if the mail operation were exposed.

A memo to the director of the office of security, dated Feb. 1, 1962, said a "flap" will put us "out of business" immediately and may give rise to grave charges of criminal misuse of the mails by government agencies."

"SINCE NO GOOD purpose can be served by an official admission of the violation, and existing federal statutes preclude the concoction of any legal excuse for the violation, it must be recognized that no cover story is available to any government agency," the memo said.

If the operation should be exposed, the memo recommended that it "might become necessary, after the matter has cooled off during an extended period of investigation, to find a scapegoat to blame for unauthorized tampering with the mails."

Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho, chairman of the intelligence committee, made public copies of two letters written by him to persons in the Soviet Union in 1971 following a visit there by him and his family. A staff aide said the letters had been intercepted by the CIA.

The committee also made available a Dec. 22, 1971 memo tightening up procedures for handling mail of officials of the government that might be intercepted.

WHILE THE MEMO said that no high ranking officials of the government were to be placed on the list of those whose mail was to be intercepted, the memo also set up special procedures for handling such mail if CIA analysts came across it in the course of their work. The memo implied that a fairly substantial volume of such mail would be handled as "special-category items."

Glomar Wasn't After Treasure, Officials Say

SACRAMENTO (UPI) — If \$30 million worth of gold doubloons from a sunken Spanish galleon lay on the ocean floor off Santa Catalina, it's still there — Howard Hughes' mystery ship Glomar Explorer did not snatch it, California officials say.

The Glomar, owned — at least on tax records — by Hughes but reportedly operated by the CIA, conducted secret tests in the same area where the galleon reportedly went down nearly 400 years ago.

Exclusive rights to search the area near Fourth of July Cove have been leased to Chuck Kenworthy, president of the Los Angeles-based Quest Corp., who charged that Hughes' deep-sea salvage vessel might have gobbled up the gold treasure during those exercises in August.

Bill Northrup, executive officer of the state Lands Commission, said yesterday that an inquiry into Kenworthy's charges concluded there was no reason to believe the Glomar had been involved with the treasure.